

**A PROCESS OF EMPOWERMENT  
THROUGH A SELF-HELP GROUP FOR  
DIVORCED WOMEN**

**by**

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## DECLARATION

I, Sibusiso Dumisani Mhlongo hereby declare that the work:

“A process of empowerment through a self-help group for divorced women” is my original work. Sources consulted or cited are acknowledged in the text as well as in the list of references.

SIGNED.....

DATE .....

## **DEDICATION**

This project is dedicated to all those women who have gone through difficult times dealing with divorce.

It is time that the world listens to your voices and cries, then allow you to be creative, ambitious, successful, loving trusting and above all being in control of your own destiny.

I wish that God can give them strength and energy as they pursue knowledge.

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## ABSTRACT

Empowerment is an act of enriching someone within a certain context to gain inner self-control. The best way of understanding empowerment is to focus on its process rather than outcome. It is also important to determine the structure upon which empowerment is likely to exist. As a result, this study was about the exploration of the interaction between empowerment as a process and the self-help group which forms a structural basis of empowerment.

Therefore, the main focus of the research study was to investigate specific processes through which one goes to achieve empowerment when participating in a self-help group for divorced women. The qualitative research method, which incorporated participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus group, formed the basis for the process of data collection and analysis. The sample consisted of 10 divorced women who participated in a self-help group for a contracted period of eight weeks.

The findings of the research study suggested that, the process of empowerment within a self-help group structure is interactive rather than linear. The process of empowerment through the self-help group encounters included discovering the reality of the divorced status, the role of frustration in the process of empowerment, critical reflection as the powerful force behind the process of empowerment and taking charge of one's life as a motivational factor that facilitated the self-help group activities and the process of empowerment. The only interpersonal factor that was significant in the study was the role of social support by group members in the process of empowerment.

The conceptualization of the process of empowerment in the context of the self-help group, that emerged from the study, was remarkably distinct from the conceptualization of empowerment that has been depicted in the literature. Therefore, a significant finding in this study was how the self-help group can facilitate the process of empowerment for divorced women, which contrasted with other studies in which a sense of community was critical to personal empowerment. The interactions which were both positive and negative with others were the foundations for the process of empowerment in the form of critical reflections.

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# **Chapter One**

Community psychology is known as the psychology of people and for the people. Its primary aim is usually to enhance the functioning of individuals and organizations. As suggested by Duffy & Wong (2000), the main intention is to empower individuals within organization or group to create innovative solutions to the problems facing them. In other words, when group of people are engaged in the process of helping themselves they get empowered in the process. They independently work through their own issues and work out strategies to deal with life challenges. It is an opportunity where individuals or community get to realize their problem solving capacity and resources in order to be self sufficient.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background to the study**

Community psychology as the field of study has a major role to play in the lives of individuals, groups and communities at large. Its primary aim is usually to enhance the functioning of individuals and organizations. Duffy and Wong (2000), suggest that the main intention is to empower individuals within organizations or groups to create innovative solutions to the problems facing them. In other words, when groups of people are engaged in the process of helping themselves they get empowered in the process. They independently work through their own issues and work out strategies to deal with life challenges. This process becomes an opportunity for individuals or

communities to realize their problem-solving capacity and resources in order to be self-sufficient (Duffy & Wong, 2000).

According to Kurtz (1997), empowerment is the process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals or collectives can take action to improve their life situations. A closer look at this definition indicates that empowerment is about helping one to help him/herself, thus clarifying the interaction between the structure (self-help group) and the process (empowerment). There is therefore a link between self-help groups aim at empowering individuals, groups and communities. Self-help groups and the community principle of empowerment are mostly inseparable. This is due to the fact that they both represent an important community resource (Kurtz, 1997). It is further argued that any action that aims to enhance a person's or group's control over situational circumstances is relevant to the theme of empowerment. People who help themselves (self-help) are indeed attempting to take control, and if they are successful, are said to be empowered.

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

While efforts have been made by researchers(Dhlomo,2003; Arosi, 1992; Mthembu, 2001; Humphrey and Rappaport,1994) to document the effectiveness of a self–help group with different groups, there is still a lack of data outlining the extent to which such groups have empowered members or members themselves being able to empower a group structure. It is therefore important to get an understanding of the process of empowerment more especially from a group of women who might have gone through a period of losing their integrity, social standing and financial resources through divorce. Such a group according to Becker (2005) encompasses a range of complex and changing emotional and social needs. To some women, the divorce process might have left them with unresolved psychosocial issues and feelings of hopelessness.

### **1.3 Motivation of the study**

There has been a limited literature that highlights the nature and process of women empowerment through self- help group. It is important to determine the factors that mediate the process of empowerment through self-help group in order to ensure the self- help group become effective and responsive to the needs of the group. This research undertaking has therefore been motivated by

the fact that it represents an empirical strategy for determining the nature of the empowerment process and which aspects and mode of empowerment process are particularly helpful or harmful to the group members.

#### **1.4 Aim and objectives the study**

The main aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the process of empowerment in a self-helpgroup situation. It further sought to fulfill the following objectives:

- identify psychological processes involved while self-help group members get empowered
- determine what group processes are empowering against those that are not.
- examine dispositional and situational variables that help to mediate the process of empowerment in a group situation.

### **1.5 The significance of the study**

The study was significant in the sense that it provided the data that allowed the researcher to gain more insight about the empowerment process operating in a self-help group for divorced women. Since this was a new group altogether, research results were used to develop guidelines for promoting empowerment of divorced women in a community setting. This also resulted in some positive contribution to researchers and mental health providers to clearly identify the specific and unique benefits of participation in self-help groups. The study also has direct positive results to group members by affording them an opportunity to learn from each other in a supportive environment. It also laid a foundation for on-going self-help groups of this nature in the future.

### **1.6 Résumé**

Community psychology has much contribution towards empowerment within the community setting. It is through self-help groups that the process of empowerment can be clearly understood. While most studies have paid more attention to the outcome of the empowerment this study aims to explore more on empowerment as the process.

The next chapter will examine the perspectives on empowerment, its relationship to women ability of gaining self-control and reflection theories that forms the basis for self-evaluation.

## **Chapter Two**

### **2. Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter reviews literature on the subject's empowerment process in relation to a self-help group as well as related literature. It is important to note that most literature has been focusing on empowerment as the outcome not as the process. Secondly, there have been limited studies that explore the relationship between a self-help group and the process of empowerment. Theories of empowerment, the art framework regarding the process of empowerment and the nature of self-help group in relation to empowerment will be critically examined below.

#### **2.2 Definition of self-help group**

Self-help group commonly known as mutual-aid group can be defined as supportive, educational and usually change oriented group that address a single life problem or condition shared by all members (Kurtz, 1997). Its purpose may be personal or societal change or both which are achieved through the use of ideologies for dealing with a life situation (Zastrow, 2001). It is through the active participation of all group members that makes it effective in dealing with social or life issues.

### **2.3 The significance of self-help groups for empowerment purposes**

The main objective of a self-help group is to provide an environment for members to help each other by forming a mutual aid system. The mutual aid in the form of a self- help group is regarded by Becker (2005), as a powerful structure to challenge loneliness. Since this study focuses on empowerment processes for divorced women, loneliness is one of the main challenges faced by such women. According to Drower (2005), groups challenge the sense of isolation, separation and loneliness.

It has also been noted that psychosocial support in the form of a self-help group can be seen to be more empowering as compared to a support group.

The reason being that self-help groups are run by members themselves and without the direct involvement of a professional (Jacobs & Goodman, 1989). They argued that every individual in the group has equal contribution and the input is valuable. Furthermore, in a group encounter, members can share the responsibilities of chairing the group. Therefore, they can be empowered with planning, organizing and leadership skills. This is an opportunity for every member of the group to learn through positive experience and get constructive feedback from fellow group members.

Empowerment can be seen as a change mechanism in a self-help group. This is due to the fact that members have come together to share a common experience and eventually create an opportunity to mobilize resources in the pursuit of needs and interests (Kurtz, 1997). In addition to that, when people feel themselves abandoned or frustrated by conventional society, they can sometimes bypass established institutions and create informal organizations on the side. Such grass root movements serve to provide otherwise unavailable services to protect indignities, to escape suffering, to relieve tension, to explain confusing events, or in some way to create a more tolerable way of life than afforded by existing formal organizations. In such powerful

engagements, self-help groups create an empowering environment which leads to a change in people's attitudes, expectations and their role in their personal life and at community level(Narayan, 2005).The environment that is empowering is significant in helping individuals, families, groups and communities increase their personal, interpersonal, socioeconomic, and political strength and develop influence towards improving their circumstances (Drower, 2005).

Self-help groups that adopt a principle of empowerment serve as the movement that has a strong voice. According to Lieberman andBorman (1979), self-help groups have been seen as support systems, as social movements, as spiritual movements and secular religions, as supplementary communities, as expressive social influence groups and as organizations of the deviant and stigmatized. In the South African context, self-help groups have been an important vehicle in facilitating the empowerment of individual group members. Movements likethe Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) is an example of how infected and non-infected people have been able to work together to increase access to treatment options (Drower, 2005).

Self-help groups that aim to empower its members can also take the form of a growth group. According to Toseland and Rivas (2001), growth groups offer opportunities for members to become aware of, expand, and change their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding themselves and others. Therefore, the group is used as the vehicle to develop member's capabilities to the fullest. This suggests that growth and empowerment are identical in the sense that they both stress self-improvement and the potential of human beings to live a full and rewarding life, especially through improved relationships with others. They provide a supportive atmosphere in which individuals can gain insights, experiment with new behaviors, get feedback, and grow as human beings (Toseland& Rivas, 2001).

#### **2.4 Characteristics of a self-help group**

While self-help groups have been classified as a form of support group, research studies have noted differences between the two. Although support groups and self-help groups can be seen as a source of psychosocial support as well as an empowerment forum, they differ in the sense that the latter is characterized by meetings that are structured; task oriented and use specific methods of help for the basic problem or condition. Support groups on the

other hand tend to be an environment whereby group members can share their emotional stuff in a supportive environment without following a certain format.

The work of Lieberman and Borman (1979), has demonstrated unique characteristics of self-help groups according to its formation and objectives. The membership formation consists of those who share a common condition, situation, heritage, symptom or experience. Furthermore, the group is self-governing and self-regulating thus emphasizing peer solidarity rather than hierarchical governance. Its main objective is to advocate self-reliance and require equally intense commitment and responsibility to other members, actual or potential. The group also aims to provide an identifiable code of precept, beliefs and practices that includes rules for conducting group meetings. As noted by Drower (2005), self-help groups are not a haphazard gathering but a meeting of people who share a common concern, issue or experience which is the reason for them coming together.

#### **2.4.1 The self-help ethos**

It has been noted by Kurtz (1997) that the one way to understand the essence of self-help is through an understanding of the self-help ethos. Riessman and Carol (1995) cited in Kurtz (1997) define ethos as a constellation of norms and sentiments, a series of themes that underlie behavior. This clearly indicates that self-help favors experience over expertise.

The best way of understanding ethos as suggested by Kurtz (1997) is through three main themes. The first theme comprises of phrases such as anti-big, anti-bureaucratic and anti-impersonality (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 2003). The second theme encompasses reaffirmation of basic core traditions of community, neighborhood, spiritual values and self-reliance. The third theme refers to empowerment.

## **2.5 Self-help groups and the process of empowerment**

It will be essential to begin the discussion with the definition of empowerment and the process of empowerment before attempting to link it with the self-help group structure.

The word empowerment can be seen in simple terms, denotes someone getting power from being empowered. In literal terms empower means to give legal

or moral power or authority while empowerment is the word that has been coined to help people feel more powerful in time of the rapid change (Rubino, 2007). Such a definition reiterates the notion of gaining control of others as well as that of limited resources.

According to Page and Czuba (1999), the understanding of the word empowerment depends on one's perspective. They further argue that in recent literature, the meaning of the term empowerment is often assumed than explained or defined. This indicates that there is no common understanding about the word empowerment. While definition of empowerment seems to depend on certain individuals projects that they are engaged in, a common understanding of empowerment is necessary.

The best way of finding a general definition of empowerment is when one looks closely what empowerment is about than what it is. In other words, empowerment can be understood in terms of its role and process. As a general definition, empowerment can be defined as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is the process that fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and their society, by acting on issues they define as important.

In their work, Page and Czuba (1994) suggested three components as the basic premise of understanding empowerment. This includes empowerment as multi-dimensional, as socially embedded and as a process. It is a multi-dimensional in the sense that it occurs within sociological, psychological, economic and other dimensions. As multi-dimensional, empowerment also takes place in various levels, such as individual, group, and community. The fact that empowerment is a social process suggests that it occurs in relationships with others. This is indication that empowerment has its strong basis on a group structure. Finally, empowerment is regarded as the process that is similar to a path or journey, one that develops while working through it. This clearly indicates that empowerment is an on-going process that does not stop. It is therefore understood better as a process than an outcome of empowerment programs or initiatives. This is in contrast with contemporary researchers who place more focus on process-outcome studies of empowerment programs. This suggests the need for studies that will pay more attention to the process of empowerment as it unfolds. It is through such kind of an approach that one is able to determine particularly helpful or harmful processes that individuals go through as they get empowered.

## **2.6 The empowerment framework**

In order to measure and monitor empowerment, it is important to have a clear definition of the concept of empowerment and specify a framework that links both empowerment to improved development outcomes and identifies determinants of empowerment itself.

Empowerment refers broadly to expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life. It implies control over resources and decisions. In cases of poor people, that freedom is severely curtailed by their powerlessness in relation to a range of institutions, both formal and informal. Since powerlessness is embedded in a culture of unequal institutional relations an institutional definition of empowerment is adopted. As suggested by Gibson (1993), empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable the institution that affects their lives.

The conceptual framework contains four building blocks i.e. institutional climate, social and political structures, poor people's individual assert and

capabilities and poor people's collective asserts and capabilities. It is the social process of recognizing, promoting and enhancing people's abilities to meet their own needs, solve their own problems, and mobilize the necessary resources in order to feel in control of their own lives (Gibson, 1993).

## **2.7 The process of women empowerment**

It has been noted from previous research findings that women empowerment can be best understood when it is linked to community upliftment. The process of empowerment is viewed as a way to nurture individual growth and human potential that can be communicated and transferred to societal growth (Rubino, 2007). This process is believed to be accompanied by a greater awareness of options, greater use of talents and often increased creativity and interdependency with those around. This is supported by Drower (2005), who maintains that during the process of empowerment, the helper does not hand over power, but facilitates people to claim their own power.

A distinction has been made between the process of empowerment and outcomes as this helps to conceptualize the essence of empowerment. According to Fetterman, Kaftarian & Wandersman (2000), empowering

processes are ones in which attempts to gain control , obtain needed resources, and critically understand one's social environment are critical. The process is empowering if it helps people develop skills so they can become independent problem solvers and decision makers. The empowering outcomes on the other hand refers to operationalization of empowermentso we can study the consequences of citizens attempts to gain greater control in their community or the effects of interventions designed to empower participants (Braye& Preston-Shoot, 2003). Therefore outcomes are evidence based and depend on the successful completion of the program designed for participants. The main priority is to measure the nature of success of the intervention program of strategies aimed at assisting participants gain access to and control of resources that have been previously denied to them. For the purpose of this study the process of empowerment is more crucial in the sense that it is about gaining more insight on what is involved and needed for the empowerment program to be successful instead of looking at the extent to which empowerment strategies have been a success.

The process of empowerment has been clearly illustrated by (South African Regional Poverty Network [SARPN], 2008) whereby five levels of women

empowerment form the basis for the empowerment process. These include welfare, access, conscientization, mobilization and control. These levels will be discussed below starting with the lower level which has influence over other levels.

The foundation or lowest level of empowerment is based on welfare. This is whereby development intervention may hope to close a gender gap. By welfare, it means an improvement in socio-economic status, such as improved nutritional status, shelter, or income. However, the less empowering factor about this level is that women are being given these benefits, rather than producing or acquiring such benefits for themselves. This is regarded as the lowest level with regard to the process of empowerment because women are seen as passive and always depend on others for survival.

The next level is access which is defined as the first level of empowerment. In this case women are engaged in the process of improving their own status through working within organizations with aim to increase access to resources. This suggests that women who are in the field of production may access all necessities e.g. water, land, market, skills training or information. It

also implies that women must have equal capabilities and equal access to resources and opportunities as men do, and women must also be able to use these capabilities and resources to make strategic choices (Grown, Rao Gupta, & Kes, 2005). In this case women's empowerment is determined by the extent to which they can access self-development opportunities as they are not denied usage of available resources. A practical example is when women can have equal access to business entities and get financial backing as compared to men. This should occur across cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Conscientization is regarded as the third hierarchy regarding the process of empowerment. This is regarded as the process in which women realize that their lack of status and welfare, relative to men, is not due to their own lack of ability, organization or effort. It involves the reassertion that women's relative lack of access to resources actually arises from the disciplinary practices and rules that give priority access and control to men. Conscientization is therefore concerned with discriminatory practices that impede women's access to resources. It is through this process that we see the potential for strategies enabling the process of conscientization, but driven by women's own needs to

understand the underlying causes of their problems, and to identify strategies for action.

The fourth level known as mobilization is the action level which complements conscientization. Firstly, it involves women coming together for the recognition and analysis of problems, the identification of strategies to overcome discriminatory practices, and collective action to remove these practices. In this case, communication may not be merely concerned with the mobilization of the group, but also to connect up with the larger women's movement, to learn from the successes of women's similar strategic action elsewhere and to link up with the wider struggle. Here communication entails joining the global sisterhood in the struggle for equal rights for women. It is in this area of conscientization and mobilization that the issue of leadership becomes crucial.

The fifth or highest level is control which is reached by women who have taken action so that there is gender equality in decision making over access to resources, so that women achieve direct control over their access to resources. They have taken what is rightly theirs, and no longer wait indefinitely to be given resources merely at the discretion of men, or by the whim of patriarchal

authority. As argued by Maholta (2005) the role of information and communication is to spread the word on the development of successful strategies. This suggests that, more vocal and expression about life challenges, the more there would be personal and social development.

Taking into account these five levels, one can conclude that empowerment is based on the processes not outcomes. The SARPAN has indicated that these five levels are not really a linear progression, as written above, but rather circular. This suggests that achievement of women's increased control, leads to better access to resources, and therefore improved socio-economic status.

The process of women empowerment seems to have received more attention among researchers as compared to men. It is argued that, the empowerment of women has been acknowledged as an important goal in international development. A diverse body of literature has emerged regarding the conceptualization and measurement of women's empowerment and its relationship with other variables of interest in international development.

The concept of empowerment can be distinguished from others by two defining features. The first one is that, none of the other concepts explicitly focus on the process of change towards greater equality or greater freedom of choice and action. The second feature is agency, in other words, women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change that is being described or measured. Women empowerment according to Andrews (1996), involves women working together, having a say about and control over their lives. In addition, women around the world are doing just that, but with a whole new kind of power, a power that comes from within. Therefore, it is more about the enhancement of women's personal capacity for trusting themselves and believing in themselves while they allow their inner strength to guide them towards achieving their goals and ambitions.

## **2.8 Dimensions of empowerment**

There are different authors who attempted to describe how the process of empowerment unfolds. Each author outlined dimensions upon which empowerment of women can be major. For the purpose of this study a framework developed by Kishor(2000) has been adopted. It includes the following dimensions:

- (a) financial autonomy
- (b) participation in the modern sector
- (c) lifetime exposure to employment
- (d) sharing of roles and decision-making
- (e) family structure amenable to empowerment
- (f) equality in marriage
- (g) women's emancipation
- (h) marital advantage
- (i) traditional marriage

The above mentioned dimensions clearly defined the expected outcome of empowerment and do not describe the process itself. This study attempts to link these dimensions or outcomes of women empowerment with the process as these will be discussed below.

## **2.9 Qualitative study of empowerment**

The qualitative studies of empowerment make an effort to capture the process through in-depth interviews and case studies that follow life challenges for specific women through retrospective narratives. Therefore, without a qualitative sense of what that participation is like or what it means, one cannot

tell whether empowerment is occurring. Assessment of the process of empowerment can only be achieved from the subjective point of view.

The subjectivity of the process should extend to measuring empowerment of women's own interpretations (Fetterman, Kaftarian & Wandersman, 2000). This means that program evaluation rather than relying on their own judgment as to what is of value, should judge the process of empowerment as having occurred if it is self-assessed and validated by women themselves.

The focus of the empowerment process also plays an important role in guiding participants to the responsibility of the actions that will lead to them being empowered. They continuously reflect on the action as they engage in the process of gaining access, influence and power over resources and opportunities that have been denied to them. They reflect on their own experiences, cultural practices and gender stereotypes. Therefore, an empowering program that does not allow participants to reflect as they go through their daily schedule of empowerment activities might be risking the danger in underestimating the power and intrapersonal forces that facilitate an empowerment process (Lord & Farlow, 1990). This can be likened to someone who reports about the trip that he arrived in time to the desired destination

while not reporting on what happened throughout the journey that has influenced its success.

In order to ensure that the research undertaken met its objective of determining the process of empowerment, reflection strategies were incorporated as one of the tools of evaluating and assessing the nature of experiences and psychological processes that participants go through as they engaged in the self-empowering program. They have to describe their actions, thoughts and expertise learned as the result of the self-help encounter with other fellow divorced women. They have to describe the process of an empowerment agent and their role as the recipient of such a process. As stated by Hawkins (1997), it is this perspective that will encourage the shared desire for broadened, accountable ownership and interdependence that will result in a broadened expression of responsibility and accomplishment.

As part of reflection, Devaki cited in Kim (1990) set five empowerment reflections that women worldwide seem to hold:

1. a desire for peace, reflecting the rejection of the political role by women
2. caring for others- family, community, and survival of the world ecologically.

3. rejection of hierarchy and the use of cooperation's as opposed to competition as a way of structuring society.
4. the capacity for self-reliance. This can be found in urban and rural women of various classes, and women of all levels of education
5. there is also a sense of tradition that women are rooted in, and carriers of cultural and religious traditions. Traditions can give women strength and a way of networking, but it also can be the cause of much pain and oppression.

On the other hand Fetterman et al (2000) outlined four reflection steps in the following patterns:

- (a) taking stock or determining where the program stands, including strengths and weaknesses;
- (b) focusing on establishing goals (determining where you want to go in future) with an explicit emphasis on program improvement;
- (c) developing strategies and helping participants determine their own strategies to accomplish program goals and objectives;
- (d) helping program participants determine the type of evidence required to document credible progress towards their goals.

There is clearly an indication that the latter aims to explore more on the process of empowerment through activities or programs while the former attempts to outline the reflection of the empowerment itself. To close the gap between the two models of empowerment reflections, the study is focused more on how the empowerment process can be successfully linked to the empowerment program or activity which is a self-help group. The models of reflecting on the empowerment process through a self-help group will be discussed below.

### **2.9.1 Reflections framework**

Reflection which is part of experiential learning, has received more attention from researchers in the field of health sciences. Schon (1983), an influential writer on reflection, described reflection in two main ways: reflection *in* action and reflection *on* action. Reflection *on* action is looking back after the event whilst reflection *in* action is happening during the event. To complicate matters there are different interpretations of reflection on action. Let's now explore these terms.

*Reflection in action means:*

“To think about what one is doing whilst one is doing it; it is typically stimulated by surprise, by something which puzzled the practitioner concerned”(Greenwood, 1993: 203).

Reflection in action allows the practitioner to redesign what he/ she is doing whilst he/she is doing it. This is commonly associated with experienced practitioners. However, it is much neglected.

*Reflection on action is defined as:*

As stated by Fitzgerald (1994, p.67) “The retrospective contemplation of practice undertaken in order to uncover the knowledge used in practical situations, by analysing and interpreting the information recalled”. We can see here that reflection *on* action involves turning information into knowledge, by conducting a cognitive post mortem. Alternatively Boyd and Fales(1983) suggest that reflection on action is the process of creating and clarifying the meanings of experiences in terms of self in relation to both self

and world. Therefore, the outcome of this is a changed conceptual perspective on life experiences.

In their work, Boud, Keogh & Walker (1985) focus more on self-development. Reflection in this case does not only add to our knowledge but challenges the concepts and theories we hold. Furthermore as a result we don't see more, we see differently. The process of empowerment for divorced women might require in action in the sense that it is more about understanding how empowerment has changed their lives and status in the society. They have to closely examine their engagement in the self-help group in each and every encounter with other fellow women. They have to explore their feelings in relation to their participation, activities and their learning experience.

### **2.9.2 Atkins and Murphy's model of reflection**

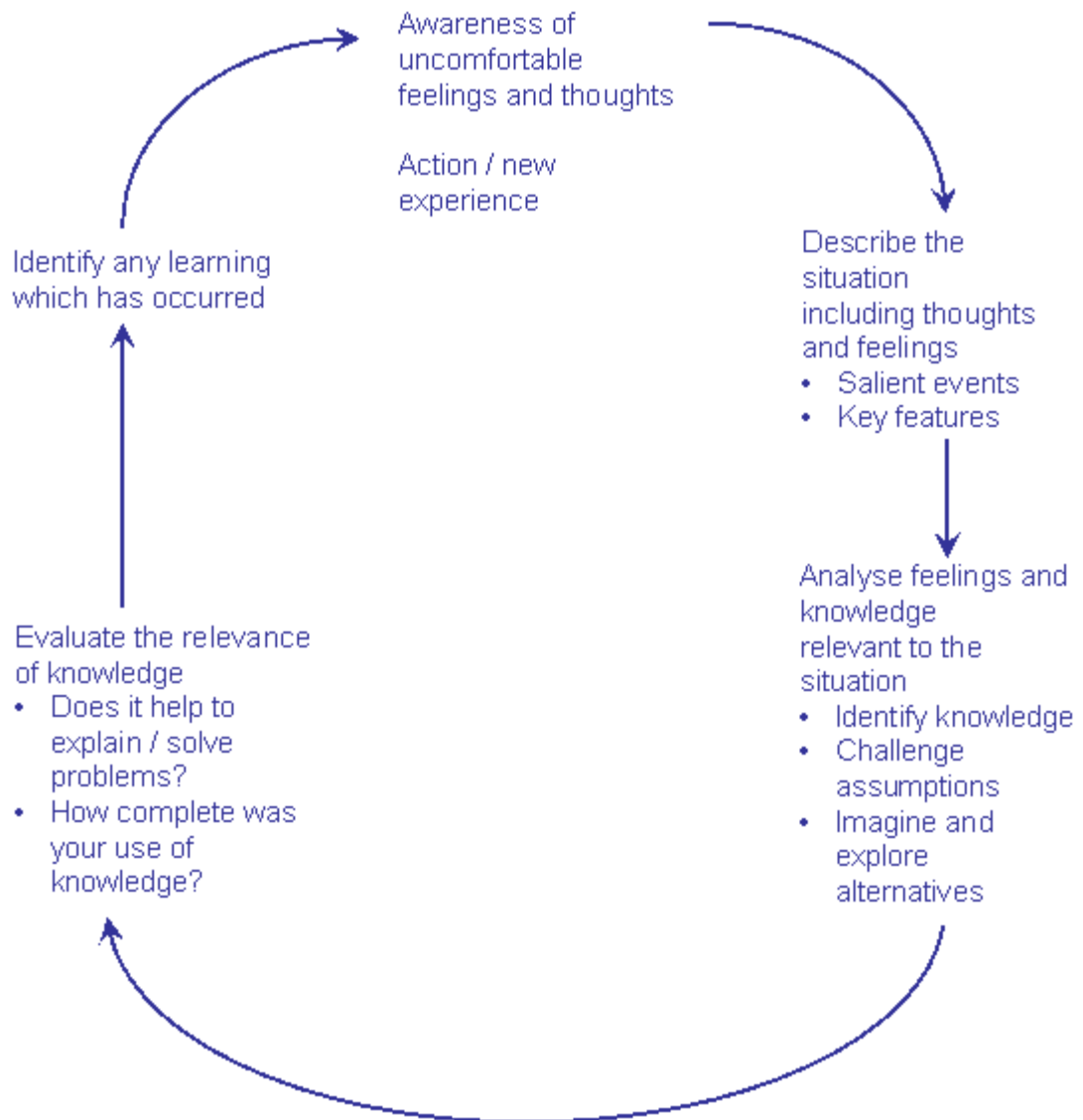
There are quite a number of reflection models that have been used in the field of learning. Their common objective is to assist an individual who is in the process of experiential learning to evaluate his/her progress as the process of acquiring learning in the field unfolds.

The most popular reflection model has been designed by Gibbs' (1988) which encourage a clear description of the situation, analysis of feelings, evaluation of experience and determining options. This can be complimented by John's

(1995) model of reflection which can be used as a guide for analysis of a critical incident or general reflection on experience. The model that reflect more on the process of empowerment is that of Atkins and Murphy (1994) which introduced a reflection concept that aims to describe the situation including thoughts and feelings, analyze feelings and knowledge relevant to their current situation, evaluate the relevance of knowledge, and identify any learning which has occurred and lastly creating an awareness of uncomfortable feelings and thoughts (Atkins & Murphy, 1994). The latter model has been identified to be relevant to the current study because it encouraged a deep sense of self evaluation in a learning environment. The rationale behind women engaging in self-help groups for divorced women is that they are bound to examine the extent to which they benefit through sharing their experiences, thoughts and ambitions while also aiming to gain more knowledge about themselves.

Most authors (Gibbs, 1988; Boud et al, 1985; Boyd & Fales, 1983; Greenwood, 1993) have alluded to the fact that empowerment is intrinsically motivated. This suggests that the power from within is the one that forms basis for empowerment. It therefore makes sense to allow participants to reflect, as this on its own can be the most empowering strategy. It provides women who have gone through a divorce the process to describe their feelings, thoughts, analyze their current feelings about being divorced, identify what they have learned from that experience and to be aware of any sort of feelings of discomfort and bad memories (Schon, 1983). This model (see fig 2.1) will

form part of the tool for assisting participants reflect on the process of being a participant in anempowering self-help group for divorced women.



**Fig 2.1 The Reflection model (copied from Atkins & Murphy 1994)**

## **2.10 Divorced women and self-help groups**

It's more important to link issues related to divorce and the role that self-help groups have in creating an environment that is safer, inspiring and most of all empowering than focusing on their divorce status only. As suggested by Gibson (1993), bringing women together creates a supporting environment where they can be comforted without the fear of criticism, being allowed to exchange ideas and practice solutions regarding issues that are pertinent in their lives. In addition, such environment help healing shattered self-esteem and personal growth take place.

The self-help group has a significant impact on empowerment in a sense that, it operates at the therapeutic level which incorporates a model offering a variety of therapeutic strategies to different clients groups. At the same time, it operates at the cultural level, where it has an important role to play in empowerment, as it functions in an anti-oppressiveframework, engaging with issues of difference and power (Cohen, Underwood & Gottlieb, 2000). This is a platform where each participant treflects on her participation in the group. This also allows group members to foster a democratic approach, where each member's contribution to the whole is valued and encouraged. This suggests

that self-help groups can be more associated with empowerment as compared to other therapeutic groups.

It has emerged in previous studies that mutual respect forms the basis for self-help groups for women empowerment (Dhlomo2003; Humphrey&Rappaport 1994; Humm1997;&Rapapport1984). According to Livingstone (1996), mutual respect is a concept that embodies a key set of beliefs and assumptions. It's essential that mutual respect and understanding is considered essential in any group encounter, so that the empowerment process can succeed. In the work of Livingstone (1996), beliefs and assumptions that promote mutual respect and empowerment for women are:

1. we believe that all people have strengths;
2. we assume that diversity (age, race, gender, sexual orientation) strengthens our group;
3. we believe that relations between groups in our local community can be organized to provide an equal balance of power;
4. we assume that users , disadvantaged by the way our society is currently structured, play the primary role in developing the strategies by which they gain increased control over valued community resources.

Considering the nature of problems experienced by divorced women, mutual respect is more crucial because it involves positive validation by others in groups who have also gone through the process of divorce (Palmer & McMahon, 1997). It is also important for the group to anticipate the knowledge that comes from involving more groups of divorced women and the greater potential for action produced by mutual support.

The fact is that the divorce might carry a lot of stigma to those who feel like victims i.e. women. An environment that promotes respect and common understanding is essential. According to Powell (1990), the most basic functions of self-help groups are to provide an arena in which someone with the problem can meet with others in a similar position. In such a setting, information that only group participants know can be shared (Powell, 1990). The self-help group encounter facilitates the processes of social comparison and identification with other women, share feelings and coping strategies, and the struggle for mutual empowerment in the face of disempowering personal family problems. As noted by Powell (1990) such processes help create important new social bonds at a time of personal isolation from one's natural system of social support and help counter the culture of silence that often

envelopes women's personal or serious psychosocial issues, particularly those who experience social stigma because of their situation. In addition to the benefits of personal disclosure and social networking, individuals often feel empowered when they gain new knowledge and give help to other fellow divorced women.

### **2.11 The effects of divorce**

There can be either negative or positive effects of divorce to women of different races and gender depending on their political, social, psychological and economic status. The negative effect of divorce to some women can be the fact that it shatters their self-esteem and at the same time it wreaks havoc on a man, but in a different way. Society still holds women responsible for the family. It has been noted that whether married, single or divorced women are still the stabilizing forces in the family (Powell, 1990). Even women who are working outside the home in positions of power are scrambling to attend recitals and soccer games and to balance their parental responsibilities with their role in the boardroom. In addition, a drop in income for both men and women after divorce noting that women experience an income drop of about 30%, while divorced men will experience about a 10% drop in their income.

According to Powell (1990), the effects of divorce on women can have severe physical maladies to a much greater degree than married people do. Furthermore, the effect of divorce on women has far more reaching emotional implications. A women's ability to love herself, to feel value and self-esteem directly affect her ability to provide her children with a safe & secured environment. It also influences her ability to be a positive role model. In addition, women's self-value and emotional well-being also affect their ability to re-couple successfully.

The effects of divorce on women can have far more reaching consequences regarding parenting as children mostly depend on their mothers. According to previous research studies, for the past ten years about fifteen in every thousand children have been affected by parental divorce each year (Cox & Desforges, 2007).

Woman's life after divorce may be characterized by issues of loss which might affect her standard of living. As mentioned by Powell (1990), life after divorce can be intensified by the everyday losses women are experiencing.

This may include economic loss, loss of house and furniture; loss of familiar and precious things and in certain cases the loss of daily contact with children. Other losses may include a loss of career, of physical security, of a sexual partner and maybe even the loss of a value system and belief that the marriage is over. The challenge facing divorced women in this case is to gain inner strength in order to fight against being victims of these losses.

There is also positive effect of divorce to both men and women that can have far reaching consequences for personal and financial freedom. The aftermath of divorce to some women help them re-discover their self-esteem, goals and their sense of independence. It helps them realize how significant they are in changing their lives and career advancement. Furthermore, financial problems can be achieved through hard work with more time dedicated to work and social life. As argued by Powell (1990), divorce can enhance women with social and interpersonal skills. They can seek more social networks and engage more on community development. This seems to suggest women's good interpersonal skills can be catalyst for women seeking self-help group encounter after divorce.

## **2.12Résumé**

The review of previous research studies in relation to self-help groups and empowerment processes gives more insight into the argument of this thesis. It has emerged that the concept of empowerment can be clearly understood as a social process of recognizing, promoting and enhancing people's abilities to meet their own needs, solve their own problems and reflect positively to their capacity for positive growth and development. There has been a close relationship between self-help groups and the process of empowerment. This is due to the fact that self-help groups are a social environment that treat every participant as equal and provide every individual an opportunity to impact knowledge to others while at the same time learning from others. In every aspect, self-help groups need to be considered as an agent for change to those who need to be empowered. The manner upon which this study attempts to explore the processes upon which women go through as they get empowered has much influence on the nature of research methods that will be discussed below.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research design & methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The research method for this study will be discussed in this chapter. This includes a brief discussion of the qualitative research design used, the characteristics of the sample chosen and the procedures for data collection and analysis of qualitative interviews. This chapter also presents some ethical considerations in the research process.

#### **3.2 Qualitative approach/methodology**

The study adopted the qualitative approach as the basis for the entire thesis. Qualitative research approach is often used as an umbrella term for various orientations to qualitative inquiry (Glesne, 1999). This term encompasses in-depth interviews, narrative interviews, focus group, participant observation and case studies among others (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Reis & Judd, 2000). The usefulness of qualitative research methods is that they rely on the

depth and quality of participants' responses and not necessarily essentially on the number of people who respond in a particular way (Silverman, 2000; Miles&Hurbeman, 1994).

### **3.3Research design**

Qualitative research design that is exploratory in nature was used as the foundation that guided the sampling method, the process of data gathering and data analysis. This incorporated the use of case study. Exploratory research design in the form of case study was seen relevant to the study that aimed to gain an understanding of the process of empowerment in a self-help group encounter situation over a certain period of time. This was achieved through exploration of the process, relationships among people, continuities and patterns overtime. This also included examining immediate socio-cultural context within which daily experience is grounded and holistic examination of the phenomenon, while at the same time the importance of context, setting and participant's frame of reference was considered (Keith; 1988, Lofland&Lofland, 1984).

The fact that there is limited data from previous studies on the process of empowerment within a group context, exploratory research design was appropriate due to the fact that it is often used to gain a broad understanding of a situation, phenomenon, community or person (Bless, Higson-smith & Kagee, 2006). Exploring the process of empowerment through case study method was useful in organizing data based on the process of empowerment holistically. All aspects of group activities leading to empowerment were reconsidered, which means that the development over time of the process of empowerment constituted an important dimension.

The exploratory design in the form of case study guided the choice of participant observation, semi-structured interviews as well as focus group discussion as methods of data collection. The focus group discussion followed the format designed by Mental Health Consumer in Action Project. The study was conducted on the premise of identifying regularities in the form of patterns (Struwig & Stead, 2001). This was in the form of participatory observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation has been incorporated since the objective is to observe certain behavior and group processes. As suggested by Struwig and Stead (2001), observation of research participants helped the researcher to look for larger trends or patterns of behavior pertinent to the study rather than for minute aspects of behavior.

The choice of participant's observation was influenced by the nature of the study which sought to determine specific processes that group members go through to achieve empowerment. The focus was, therefore, on certain behaviors and activities that existed during group meetings. This included observation of topics initiated by group members themselves. The researcher's role was only to comment on those topics. Participant observation also provided opportunities for prolonged contact with participants to validate aspects of the data and ensure the rigor of the study (Sandelowski, Davis & Harries, 1989).

Semi-structured interviewing methods were employed together with participant observation because they seem applicable to exploratory and descriptive studies that examine processes, relationships among people, continuities and patterns overtime, and the immediate socio-cultural context within which daily experience is grounded and a holistic examination of the phenomenon is stressed as well as the importance of context, setting and participants' frame of reference (Keith, 1988; Lofland & Lofland, 1984). The goal of the semi-structured interview was to elicit the participants' reflection of each and every group interaction which formed part of empowerment process. This was based on interpretations of their experience by capturing

how the empowerment process is perceived, understood and experienced by those who have made decisions to take part in the process (Schwartz-Barcott & Kim, 1986, Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Furthermore, the use of interviewing with observation enhanced validity as it assured that the truth on observations was checked with the active questioning of the interview situation and vice versa (Chernitz & Sanson, 1986; Schwartzman & Straus, 1973).

### **3.3.1 Participants and sampling procedure**

The sample consisted of 10 divorced women living around Durban in KwaZulu Natal. Only those who had been divorced for more than twelve months were considered for the study. This allowed them to share more experiences of being a divorcee as compared to those who had just been divorced for a few months.

The non-probability sampling method in the form of convenience sampling strategy was used to select participants for the study. As stated by Struwig and Stead (2001), the nature of non-probability sampling is that the probability of any particular member of the population is unknown and therefore selections of sampling units are based on personal judgment.

According to Lather (1986), the limitation with this non-probability is that, it does not allow a way of knowing precisely the degree to which the sample corresponded to the universe it represents, However, the focus of the study was to look at response patterns during group encounter rather than the way behavioral traits or special individual characteristics are distributed in the unknown universe whose systematic nature is either taken for granted or ignored (Doherty, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1991, Homgman, 1970). Therefore, the sample was justified as appropriate to search for patterns that occur in consideration of empowerment of women who had gone through changes in their lives as a result of divorce.

Furthermore, this method of sampling was seen appropriate for the study because according to Terreblanche and Durrheim (1999), it relies on the willingness and availability of participants to participate in the study. It also emphasizes the relevance of cases instead of their representativeness. It has been noted that, one of the objectives of the qualitative research method is to obtain detailed information from a limited number of participants without making generalizations (Glesne, 1990). Therefore, the choice of research

participants was based on their ability to participate in self-help group on a regular basis (Flick, 1998).

Participants were invited to join the self-help group through telephone invitations, emails and distribution of pamphlets in various organizations. Invitation letters were also distributed to other colleagues and community organizations to recommend their clients to join the self-help group. Pamphlets that explained more about the purpose and the nature of the study were distributed accordingly to colleagues and community organizations. The database of divorced women who had been seen for consultation with the researcher was consolidated. The list was combined with the one obtained from colleagues in the field. The process of phoning and emailing participants was conducted under the supervision of the researcher. There were some who phoned to enquire about joining the self-help group after obtaining information from pamphlets. There was only one woman who indirectly received counseling through her daughter's therapeutic encounter with a psychologist. The rest of the women have never been seen for counseling before and after divorce

### **3.3.2 Procedure for data collection**

The procedure for the whole self-help group encounter was designed following patterns introduced by Mental Health Consumer in Action Project which includes the following steps

#### **Step 1**

##### *Publicize and run first public meeting*

This was the process of going through advertisements and networking with other professionals to those who might be interested to join. The first meeting took place at the church hall and most people knew each other for the first time and build rapport. The next meeting place was democratically chosen so it was up to the group to identify the convenient setting for future meetings that will meet their interest. The meeting place was at the hall for one of the schools in the city center.

#### **Step 2**

##### *Define the purpose of the group*

It emerged that all participants were attending a self-help group for the first time; therefore the concept of a self-help group in relation to empowerment

was clearly defined. The group helped to brainstorm and agreed on the following points which formed the basic purpose of their meetings:

- to mutually support, in confidence their losses and frustrations as the result of divorce;
- to work up towards reducing stigma and dealing with cultural beliefs as well as religious beliefs associated with divorced status of a women;
- to provide a safe place for discussing and listening with the emphasis of mutual respect;
- to actively seek new sources and information on coping skills and self-development;
- to establish a long term future organization that will help to provide emotional support and practical help in dealing with problems associated with divorce.

### **Step 3**

*Decision on meeting format:*

The group agreed to meet every second Sunday of the month. The afternoon slot was preferred by majority of the group members as it was assumed they had all come back from church that time. The duration of each group meeting was one and half hour session. The group further decided to start with an eight step program instead of twelve in order to see whether this is going to suit their needs. The group divided to take a formal route where proper planning on topics will take place. Each group member was allowed to chair the

meeting and take responsibility of structuring the time and program for the day. The group discussed the issues relating to confidentiality and the researcher discussed his position of being a neutral member and has minimal involvement in the process. The group was able to design a confidentiality form, see appendix A.

The guidelines that helped the group to function included statements like:

- we listen and respect each other and don't judge
- we know that information we share will remain confidential
- we all share the responsibility for making the group work
- we each have an opportunity for equal air time or the right to remain silent

#### **Step 4**

*Develop shared leadership:*

The group discussed their different roles in facilitating an effective group process. They agreed that chairing the meeting would be done by most of the members but with the help of those who felt they had enough and adequate resources such as access to email and internet.

## **Step 5**

*Encourage members to attend meetings on a regular basis:*

The attendance in the first two meetings was good until the third one where the group lost momentum to keep time and adhere to the meeting schedule. It took an effort from one group participant to encourage and re-invite all members to review the purpose of the meetings. That is where the role of reflections assisted most members to establish their level of motivation and commitment to the group. The decision was that in every meeting, twenty minutes will be allocated to 'check in' where reflection will be discussed and options explored.

## **Step 6**

*Develop agendas:*

The last 10 minutes of every session was allocated to setting an agenda for the following meeting. Most of the agenda took the following format:

1. greetings and introduction of members;
2. checking in: reflections of previous group encounter;
3. discussion, education and information sharing;
4. business section and
5. planning agenda for the next meeting

The reflection model by Atkins and Murphy (1994) was used as the guideline in formulating semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion, see appendix C. The use of biographical information was seen as an added advantage as it elicited more information about the nature and background of the group participating in a self-help group. This also gives more data about dispositional and situational variables that help to mediate the process of empowerment in a group situation.

### **3.3.3 Procedure for data analysis**

Data analysis was conducted through the progressive use of two methods, namely: thematic and social construction analysis. The main purpose was to establish concurrent flows of activities and organizing data into meaningful units (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This involved four steps of organizing data into meaningful units. The first step was data reduction, whereby selection, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transformation of raw data were dealt with (Sales & Folkman, 2000). This was followed by a conclusion drawing, which was the process that would allow the researcher to decide what things meant, noting regularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations, causal flows and propositions. Such kind of data analysis allowed the

researcher to always be in contact with the data and to ensure that theoretical elements in favor of the empowerment process were considered as the focus of data analysis and discussion of results at a later stage.

The data was also analyzed in relation to the research questions and preceded simultaneously with data collection. All elements of data in the form of transcribed interviews and observation notes were read and re-read, so that the researcher was fully immersed and intimate with the data prior to intensive analysis. Each interview was examined in detail and coded independently initially; coding labels were chosen to reflect the actual words of the participants to avoid premature abstraction and distortion of meaning. The categories were from the interpretations of what the participants had said.

The antecedents, context, contingencies and consequences were considered in relation to the categories. Memoranda were written in relation to various themes in the data and enabled the researcher to move from the data to a conceptual level (Miles & Huberman 1994). As Aamodt (1991) noted, this transformation of data from one level of analysis to another required a sense

of awareness and an intuitive sense of the whole of the data. The themes reflected only the content of the interviews.

To capture the process of empowerment, the interviews were re-written in a chronological sequence. The women's stories were written in a descriptive manner with little, if any, interpretation to avoid premature interpretation and explanation (Schwart-Barcott & Kim 1986). The stories captured the women's feelings, responses, patterns and perspectives (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

During data analysis, there was an intense and intimate interplay among the researcher, the women's group, the data and the emergence of the process of empowerment. In addition, theoretical notes and memoranda were studied and integrated into the analysis. Furthermore, definitions of empowerment and its outcome were refined as well as pre-conditioned; influencing factors and consequences of empowerment were examined.

### **3.4 Ethical considerations**

In every scientific research whether it involves humans or non-human objects, preserving ethical guidelines of not doing harm to research subjects is

essential. As suggested by Silverman (2000), when one is studying people's behavior or asking them questions, not only the values of the researcher, but also the researcher's responsibilities to those studied have to be faced.

The process of inviting research participants was facilitated by written informed consent that they have to sign. This includes the title of the project, introduction, purpose and objectives of the study, procedure, discomforts and risks, potential benefits, confidentiality, voluntary participation and contact information for questions or comments. Therefore, the researcher ensured that the invitations to join the self-help group clearly defined the aims and objectives of the study. This time, the purpose of the invitations was clearly outlined and that the researcher has minimal role in the process and that this is not a therapeutic encounter with the psychologist, but a joint research project for their own empowerment. The benefits of being part of the study were fully explained. This included group therapeutic encounter as one shared and learnt from others' experiences.

In keeping with ethical considerations in social research, the researcher highlighted the full details of the study when recruiting potential group

members. This allowed potential participants, informed consent to join the group for research purposes. Issues of confidentiality were stressed to those recommending their clients for research purposes. Other professionals were encouraged to seek permission from their clients, before submitting their names to the researcher.

The main purpose of the study, which is social advocacy, was highlighted in the consent forms. Participants were reminded in all sessions they attended that it was not a counseling session with the psychologist, but a joint research project aiming at empowering them as individuals. The procedure was fully explained which includes the fact that a group will meet twice a month for at least one and half hours for the maximum of twelve sessions. Furthermore, they full participation in the sessions will be expected. The issues regarding potential benefit was also highlighted in the consent form. This includes meeting other people who shares the same divorce status and experience, gaining expertise, getting comfort as well as getting encouragement from other women.

The contract for the twelve sessions which was later reduced to eight sessions was drawn in collaboration with all members involved in the self-help group encounter. The researcher was aware that during group encounter, there could be a possibility of others experiencing emotional discomfort, thus needing immediate psychological intervention. Since the researcher is the psychologist such feelings and emotions were dealt with as they arose. Participants were also made aware via informed consent form that should they choose to withdraw for the study, they can still be allowed to be part of the self-help group.

The researcher spent a significant amount of time building rapport, in order to ensure that the issues of trust were addressed in the initial stages of the group process. The researcher tried as much as possible to minimize his group participation in order not to influence the empowerment process. Every group detail was kept confidential and group members were constantly reminded about confidentiality agreement in every meeting attended. Since the researcher will publish the research findings for academic purposes, identifying information, including the names of the institution they work for would not be used.

### **3.5Résumé**

The qualitative research method allows research participants to be actively involved through the process of data collection. Such a research approach is more relevant in the nature of study whereby the depth and quality of data is the main objective. Exploration research design which incorporated case study has been used as the foundation for the entire research project. Participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion had been used as part of the research instruments. The principles of a self-help group were adopted which included eight group meetings excluding the first planning session. Data analysis followed qualitative methods of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawings. In the next chapter a display of data in the form of thematic representation has been clearly demonstrated.

## **Chapter four**

### **Data Presentation, analysis and discussion**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the responses from all tools used to collect data. The responses from biographical data are presented and briefly discussed. The themes that emerged from individual interviews and group meetings are presented, analyzed and discussed qualitatively.

#### **4.2 Biographical information**

Based on the biographical inventory (see appendix B), the following information was obtained:

- The majority of participants have obtained tertiary education, with only one participant only matric.
- The race of all participants was African.
- The age of most participants is between 42 and 49 years, with only three participants below the age of 40.

- The majority of participants hold professional jobs.
- Most participants have been divorced for more than two years with the highest number of years being 12.
- The majority of participants have custody of children older than ten years.
- There were only three participants that have reliable external source of financial support. They have to provide care and support for their children without the assistance from their estranged partners.
- The majority of participants relied on friends as a source of psychosocial support.
- All participants do not belong to any community organization or group affiliation.

### **4.3 Individual interviews**

#### **4.3.1 Listening to others stories**

The majority of participants indicated that they were motivated to attend an empowerment program because they wanted to listen others experiences of divorce...*when you have gone through a stage of divorce you tend to wonder*

*whether you have made a right decision. It is encouraging to listen to other people's stories regarding their experiences of divorce....you grow personal when you hear others telling you that what you have gone through has taught them good lessons.*

*I have been looking forwards to meetings like this...as they speak, it's like their voices are talking within myself...it revives my soul and very encouraging.*

#### **4.3.2 Features of the self- help group encounter**

Most research participant's find self-help groups as a safe place to talk about their own experiences.

*When I saw the advertisement of the self-help group for divorced women, I thought this is a right place where I have to share my experiences without being judged.*

*...soon after the divorce I found myself very lonely, there was no one to talk to because some people thought you going to still their husbands...*

The majority of participants share the same sentiment regarding self-help groups as a place to meet new friends.

*...to be honest I would have never met Jabu if it was not for this meeting. You can see we have strong bond.*

*...you know what, after my divorce I tried one relationship with a guy and I found it boring. It's better to get friends here because it's professional and you work as a family.*

*...It's so encouraging that after a long time I have managed to join a group of women like this...they have become my new home and I wish this kind of friendship can last for ever...*

Some participants believe that self-help group has been a source of strength to them.

*...Since I joined the group, I feel more energetic and I wish this group would have started when my ex-husband was abusing me...*

*...as for me, with the four sessions that I have been part of, the group has made me realize that I am a stronger person and I can deal with more life challenges...*

*...This group has strong people who make you forget about past difficult moments...When women met like this, they become a strong force and I hope this will last for good. In this point in time I feel like a strong mother who will ensure that my children get what they deserve. I am sick and tired of men who do not meet their financial responsibilities when it comes to raising children.*

#### **4.3.3 Working through issues that are painful and very sensitive**

The majority of women found it easy in a reduced space to share their frustrations regarding their children's' maintenance.

*...ladies I think my experience was worse because my ex-husband decided to deny paternity of his two children. He went to the extent of bribing the lab technician to come with results stating that he is not the biological father.*

*That man is so evil that he even phones my children telling them that they must not bother calling him anymore because he is not interested....*

*... I have tried in vain to get maintenance from him as he keeps on changing jobs...he threatened to kill me and even called me a slut as I tried to discuss the need to buy children clothes for Christmas...*

*...I will never forget the time he embarrassed my kid at school telling the principal to send the child to a children's home because he is sick and tired to look after a useless child...*

#### **4.3.4 The process of searching for alternatives**

This was the most challenging moment for most participants in the group.

*... I have tried several times to have new intimate relationships but I find it difficult to trust men...I started drinking but unfortunately this has resulted in weight problems...*

*I thought dating married men was going to make me happy but I am not...There are times where I feel jealous and possessive at the same time I feel guilty...*

*... I tried to relocate to another place, but I could not succeed due to financial constraints... as a result I was stressed that I even lost weight...*

To some participants, searching for alternatives has more favorable consequences.

*...When he chased me away from the house I had built, I went back to stay with my parents in order to save money...now, I have bought a new car and a nice flat...*

*...to me divorce has been a blessing in disguise because. My ex-husband was very controlling and abusive... after divorce; I went to work in Canada for three years, saved some money and completed my Master's degree while in Europe...I have come back and working as a lecturer, something that would never have happened if I was still married to that controlling freak...*

#### **4.3.5 The knowledge gained through a self-help group encounter**

The majority of participants believed to have learned that being financially independent is the best solution to develop in life.

*...coming here has helped me realize freedom and prosperity*

*...Its painful to think that many women are sitting in abusive marriages because they don't rely on their husbands for support...*

*...I have noted that most of us the a group are professionalswhich suggests that the more you earn a better salary the more you are able to think about what can make you happy....*

*... My ex-husband started to feel bad when I got promoted and he always had comments like "I think I am superior"... as from then he stopped buying groceries and went to stay ...with a girlfriend...I know him, he is a proud man ...he thought I will plead for his return but instead I stayed with my sonand until I decided to divorce... now he has been retrenchedand he always asks for forgiveness saying that he will not hurtme any more...*

There are those participants who felt that a self-help group encounter has taught them to be open about their feelings.

*... I only learnt from this group how to discuss my marriage problems.*

*...The five sessions that I have attended have helped me realize that keeping quiet about sad issues can hurt you a lot...*

*... I know myself as a reserved person, but now I am surprised to learn that I can talk like this... When I got divorced two years ago, I told myself that talking about my abusive marriage will open wounds, but today I realize through meeting other women that talking and sharing experiencing can make you strong...when I was told that I will chair the meeting I asked myself what is going to happen because I was clueless...*

*To be honest I thought of missing the session but my friend was policing me... I know now that chairing the meeting requires active listening and an objective view of the whole situation...*

#### **4.4 THE PROCESS OF EMPOWERMENT**

A conceptual model of the process of empowerment for divorced women has been supported by observation of the empowerment process, keeping memos of activities and reflections on the empowerment process. Throughout the process, it appeared that the participant's commitment to gain more financial

freedom and emancipation for themselves has motivated and sustained the process of empowerment.

Frustrations from the legal system and from family structures were a powerful force that permeated the process and was a critical factor in helping the women to discover reality. Furthermore, frustrations evoked ongoing cycles of critical reflection which subsequently enabled the participants to take charge of their situation and, then, to hold onto their sense of power even during changing circumstances. Observed participatory competence was the outcome of the process. Although the process of empowerment was presented in a sequential manner in these findings, reality as it is lived and perceived was not entirely captured since, in the human experience, multiple events and processes occur simultaneously.

The process of empowerment is interactive rather than linear sequence of personal development. The components of the process of empowerment are interdependent and overlapping. However, this dynamic process can be analyzed more clearly when considered sequentially one component at a time

consequently; the presentation of the process of empowerment which follows is more clearly delineated with discrete phases.

#### **4.4.1 COMPONENTS OF THE PROCESS OF EMPOWERMENT**

##### **4.4.1.1 Discovering reality of divorce status**

The women's response to their divorce experience was enigmatic. In the first phase of the process of empowerment, 'discovering reality', the women responded emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally.

###### *4.4.1.1.1 Emotional responses*

Many of the women realized that there were a lot of challenges of being a divorcee. They feel victimized and discriminated by the legal system and some community members. As a result, they are confused and angry at the same time. The lack of social support and ongoing social stigmatization has left them vulnerable. As indicated during presentation of biographical information, family structures that are amenable to empowerment have been lacking and left them doubting as to whether their decision to divorce will ever be accepted by their relatives including their religious community.

The women experienced a range of feelings as part of the process of accepting the situation and realizing that crucial aspects of the situation could not be changed. They cannot force anyone to accept their decision to divorce but, their lives should go on.

#### *4.4.1.1.2 Cognitive responses to the quest for information*

Following divorce, women in this study felt very unsure and uncertain. During that time, they were mostly receptive to outside help. They individually embarked upon quests for information in order to understand their situation. They sought out as much information as possible from friends, counselors or other women of similar situations.

In the early stages they believed everything that was told to them was the truth. They relied on mental health care professionals to make sound decisions for them. The psychologist in particular, was considered to be the ultimate expert. There was a strong sense of trust in people who provided care to them and their children who have been traumatized as a result of divorce. They expected that mental health care professionals would make the right decisions and would be available to them. Initially, they were recipients of care rather than active

participants in care. Because of their unfamiliarity with and inexperience of the situation, external sources of information were authoritative. Throughout the self-help group encounter, many women recalled their anxiety and frustration when they did not understand what was happening.

#### *4.4.1.1.3 Behavioural responses*

Women assumed responsibility for their emotional, financial and physical being, in so doing; they did everything possible for themselves and their children. Many of the women reported that in dealing with their situation, they were merely doing what was best for their children. One woman simply said 'It was difficult to see my child witnessing me crying day and night'. In the women's minds, there was no choice. When applauded for their efforts, they simply responded that they were doing the only thing that they could do. There was no other option for the participants, being mothers who loved and desired the best for her child.

#### **4.4.1.2 The role of frustration in the process of empowerment**

Frustration was a predominant theme in most of the discussion during self-help group encounter. Women encountered numerous frustrations within the family, with the legal system, as well as within themselves.

#### *4.4.1.2.1 Frustrations with the legal system*

Attrendhas developed in a legal fraternity whereby the divorce proceeding and its consequences depend on the strengths of argument of lawyers from respective parties. Most of the participants reported their frustration because the child's care needs were primarily their responsibility while their father was not willing to co-operate during maintenance court appearances. Therefore, the burden of the child's care needs fell on the mothers. The mother even if she got a low salary, she has to ensure that school fees are paid, buy clothes and take the child to holiday destinations and other recreational activities. Many indicated that they did not receive the support they needed from the court regarding maintenance.

The women were annoyed when their ex-husbands did not want to take responsibilities to ensure that children are well cared for. They speculated that their ex-husbands wanted to see them upset or else they wanted to punish

them by using more expensive lawyers to deprive them assets during the divorce process. Two women noted that all they wanted was to ensure that their children receive love and care from both parents. They did not want to reconcile with their ex-husbands or their money. They just wanted a commitment from a father by demonstrating love and support to their children. A woman who had been divorced more than five years said,

*“the fact that I have divorced my husband does not divorce him from being father to our two kids as there is no ex-father in life”*

Two of the women during the discussion indicated that their marriages would have ended ultimately, but the presence of the innocent children in the family accelerated the demise of the marriage. They finally divorced after realizing that their children's emotional status was not healing. It therefore appeared among women during the study that lack of support and understanding from the legal system for them was both frustrating and disappointing.

#### *4.4.1.2.2 Frustrations with the mental health care system*

Through the course of the divorce, negative changes in the child's emotional status elicited concerns and anxieties in the mothers. Because of their concern and uncertainty as to what to do, they sought help from mental healthcare professionals. Mothers experienced strong feelings of frustration, particularly when it came to paying bills for psychological help their children had received. Waiting for the appointment with the psychologist was frustrating while their husbands sometimes terminated medical aid.

To most women, visiting psychologists was stressful in the sense that as the mother you have to answer more questions that precipitate feelings of guilt. There are also times whereby a mother wishes that the child's emotional status can improve rapidly. Waiting in the reception while your child is being attended to also result in a high level of anxiety, said one of the participants. She added that "you sometimes feel that the psychologist is inflicting more pain to the child instead of helping out". To other women, waiting for answers to questions, waiting for the child to heal or progress, or waiting for the child to make a decision whether to stay with you or her father was also a difficult part. Travelling to and from in a large, congested city added to aggravations. Repeating the child's health history over and over as well as updating teachers

about the child's emotional status was very irritating. Also frustrating was not having answers to solve the child's difficulties in coping with the parent's divorce. Another difficulty arises as mother not knowing or understanding what was happening to the child's mind. As well, mothers experienced frustrations when prescribed home activities are not adhered to due to child's lacking sense of responsibility or as a result of acting out behavior.

#### *4.4.1.2.3 Frustrations with self*

Additionally, women experienced frustrations with themselves when their customary ways of coping with divorce were no longer effective. One woman noted that she had to stop focusing on herself, her sadness, envy and anger and deal with her situation and make the best of what she could to change her predicament. Clearly, frustration was a predominant theme in all of the discussions during the self-help group sessions. The frequency, intensity and duration of various frustrations evoked ongoing cycles of critical reflection which ultimately enabled the women to develop a sense of personal power and helped them to face reality.

#### **4.4.1.3 Critical reflection**

The escalation of frustrations forced the mothers to evaluate themselves and examine their situations critically. Unquestionably, their self-interests were threatened. Frustration, clearly, was a catalyst for growth and change and mediated the empowerment process. Meanwhile, women developed confidence in their knowledge of and abilities to care for themselves and their children.

They eventually came to the realization that they love their children better than anyone else. They fully examined their situation to understand and determine where their difficulties lay and what they could do about them, in terms of their attitudes and behaviors. Throughout the process, they evaluated what was important for themselves as well as for the children. The process of critical reflection was necessary for them to be able to take charge of their situation in a proactive manner and to develop a sense of personal power. Through the process of critical reflection, women became aware of their strengths, abilities and resources. All of the women employed a positive style of thinking making downward comparisons which enabled them to see their own situations more favorably. All of the mothers prompted out how the divorce process made them realize how much worse their own situation

could be. A focus on the positive aspects of the situation did not minimize in any way what the mothers lived with yet, their comfort and familiarity with their own situation made the situation of others seem worse. Furthermore, women learned to appreciate the inherent goodness within their situation.

All of the women noted how much they had learned to appreciate what they had and not to take aspects of life for granted. Through the process of critical reflection, the women also searched for a purpose or found the meaning of their plight. Younger (1991) discovered, by accepting the reality of the situation, individuals re-organize the meaning of life. Furthermore, they finally realize that events cannot be changed therefore; they relinquish their hopeless expectations and become free from longing for what has been lost. They accept what cannot be changed and make a conscious decision to move forward.

#### **4.4.1.4 Taking charge**

Once the women were aware of their strengths and were confident in their knowledge of their divorce status, they took charge of the situation. No longer did the women subordinate their perspectives and judgments to those of others. As Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule (1986) contend, the

onegaining authority means a shift from external to internal as women learn to listen to their own voice. The mothers learned to assert themselves and, in so doing, their growing sense of confidence was reinforced.

Taking charge entailed (a) advocating for themselves, (b) leaning strategies to interact effectively with the legal system, (c) learning to persist to get the attention they needed for themselves, (d) negotiating with legal professionals so that opinions and requests were heard, and (e) establishing a partnership in which there was mutual respect and open communication between the legal system and the divorced women as well as commitment to a common goal.

#### *4.4.1.4.1 Advocating for their divorce status*

Women saw themselves as an advocate for their divorce status, because other women in troubled marriages were so dependent upon them for social support. They feel more confident to challenge the legal system and other systems responsible in oppressing the wishes and aspirations of women living unhappily in their marriages and those who are being victimized due to their divorce status.

#### *4.4.1.4.2 Empowerment in divorced women*

During the self-help group encounter, women felt compelled to speak on other divorced women's behalf because they realized that no one else would do that.

This was noticed in many statements that women have made e.g. *"...I think as we sit here we have a responsibility to help those who still have difficulties in standing for their rights, I will start the campaign in church because that is where most women get victimized, what about starting our own magazine whereby we will provide more information and strategies on how to survive after divorce,"*

The sentiment shared by most women was that of unleashing their potential in order to get equal access to the legal system and support from their family. They have come to realize that they don't owe their families any form of an apology but instead their families are owing them support, respect and understanding.

#### *4.4.1.4.3 Learning the ropes*

One woman explained, 'it's a matter of gaining understanding on how to deal efficiently with the legal and mental health care system'. She has recently

succeeded in getting support from her ex-husband through lawyers. 'I've learned a lot and I'm learning to get it right". One woman shared her recent experience with the group, she said, *"After listening to Joy's (not her real name) story, I tried the strategy of creating more space for my kid to visit their father without me restricting them, they only spend three days and eventually come back. They said, we now realize that dad is irresponsible and we will support you to fight him in court for maintenance even if it means exposing him in the newspaper since he is a proud man"*. According to her, the group encounter has helped her learn different ways of pursuing her maintenance case with her ex-husband that has been dragging for years.

#### *4.4.1.4.4 Learning to persist*

The women relentlessly continued to assert themselves and to advocate for their rights as divorcees. Many of the women learned to write letters of complains and understand legal terms and questions frequently asked by family advocates so that they were assured of getting the information they wanted. Some also requested another legal opinion in order to be more equipped during their legal battle.

Some women enlisted the support of the church elders because they believed that if the family members would not listen to them they would listen to the senior women in the church. With time, even the women who considered themselves shy became more comfortable with, and assertive in their interactions with their ex-husband. There was a consistent theme of 'never giving up. The women persevered to get the best support from their families of origin.

#### *4.4.1.4.5 Driving negotiation within the family structure*

All of the women reported that getting support and understanding from their family members was very stressful. Women found it very difficult to have a sense of power in a setting where attitudes and beliefs seem more conservative and authoritative yet, the women find their own way, initiated changes in their interactions with family elders including in-laws. To most women, they became adept at making their voices heard clearly, they were the driving force for negotiations with family members because that is the kind of support and love that they need the most. They wanted to create a good impression with their in-laws despite the fact that they might be in favor of their own son or relative.

#### *4.4.1.4.6 Establishing partnerships*

Women wanted a partnership with other women organizations that dealt with the care and support of women and children in terms of being an associate, a collaborator and an active participant in the wellbeing of disempowered women and their children. Although women needed maintenance and support for their children, they also wanted respect and acknowledgement from the family members and the community. They wanted their abilities and expertise to be recognized so that they could be a full participant in their child's health care. The frustrations the women repeatedly acknowledged related to not being recognized for senior positions at work resulted in a need of establishing partnerships with the media and business entities.

The women acknowledged the expertise of the psychologist and other mental health care professionals; however, it was not always apparent that the psychologists respected the women's expertise in handling their divorce ordeal. Therefore, integral to the process of empowerment was being able to achieve a goal in co-operation with others. Key to successful partnerships were a mutual respect and open communication between the women and mental health care professional. The women in this study derived a sense of

satisfaction when there was a mutual exchange with other women organizations and a commitment to a common goal.

Observing women during the self-help group encounter revealed that they acknowledged that they did not want total control of the situation. In situations which were unfamiliar to them, they relied on the expertise of the mental health care professionals and other resourceful agencies, yet they wanted opportunities for discussion so that they were fully aware of their situation. What they also wanted was recognition for their insights, suggestions, abilities and skills of taking care of themselves and their children. In other words, they wanted to be heard. Agnes (not her real name) said "I like my opinion to be listened to, I don't really want total control but I want the psychologist and church elders to be open to listen to me". This is an indication that women acknowledged the fact that their problems cannot be resolved without the support of others. Seeking partnership to women in the research study meant the recognition of inner strength and the need to get more strength.

#### *4.4.1.4.7 Holding on*

The final phase of the process of empowerment was 'holding on'. As a result of the women's awareness of their strengths, competencies and capabilities, they were able to maintain their own sense of power even during changing circumstances. Although the women experienced feelings of disappointment, frustration and anger, their core abilities endured. In 'holding on', the women developed a sense of personal control in terms of regulating their own responses. Through ongoing cycles of critical reflection of their self-help group encounter, the mothers became cognizant of the dynamics within situations. Therefore, they tried to be understanding and patient when outcomes were not what they anticipated. Consequently, they continued to persist with their efforts to attain a desired outcome and established new time frames for their goals that needed to be achieved.

All of the women were remarkable in their perseverance and persistence. Those women who were more able to hold on to their power experienced a sense of satisfaction from knowing that they were doing all they could to make their life better. Other women were dependent on being heard in order to hold on to their power. Many of the women in the group were involved with other activities, such as work, school, recreation, or support groups. Such

involvement provided a balance in their lives that renewed their energies to deal with their situation and sustained their ability to 'hold on'.

#### **4.5 OUTCOME OF THE PROCESS OF EMPOWERMENT WITHIN THE SELF-HELP GROUP CONTEXT**

The phases of discovering reality, critical reflection, taking charge and holding on indicate that the process of empowerment was largely interpersonal. The women developed and employed the necessary knowledge, competence and confidence for making their voices heard. In becoming empowered, women developed confidence in their knowledge of their divorce status and in their decisionmaking for their future.

Decisions were consistent with their goals and their own sense of meaning. Women as a result of the self-help group encounter became a voice of authority and were able to collaborate effectively with the legal system and mental health care professionals. Thus, the women had a personal sense of taking charge and an ability to be assertive and to take action consistent with their values, beliefs, goals and needs. The mothers were empowered when they were full participants in their personal lives. This was achieved through

working towards mutually agreed upon goals for their future with mental health care professionals and when they were heard by family members. The women did not want to dictate to the legal system and health care professionals what should be done to improve their lives and that of their children. They also did not want the psychologists to agree with their requests or suggestions without some confirmatory dialogue. What these women needed the most in order to be empowered was to be heard by the legal system and mental health care professionals. Therefore, the outcome of the process of empowerment in this group of women was conceptualized using Kieffer's (1984) language of participatory competence. In his own words, Kieffer (1984) defined participatory competence as an abiding set of commitments and capabilities.

In this study, Kieffer's definition was refined and redefined as the ability to be heard by those with power and influence. The group of women in this study who attained participatory competence, (a) had developed sound knowledge of their divorce status, (b) were competent in caring for their child and in making decisions consistent with what they knew regarding their future goals, and (c) had developed confidence in communicating what was best for the child.

Although the three indicators reflect personal competence, there is a relational aspect of empowerment which is that of being heard. In being heard, the mothers perceived that their family members were receptive and responsive to what they had to say and that their expertise was recognized by other women agencies. Women who attained participatory competence were associates, collaborators and participants in their own personal lives.

The women's ability to hold on to their own sense of power was not contingent on an attainment of participatory competence. Women could still have a sense of personal power even when they were not heard; however, the women who were the most empowered attained participatory competence. Therefore, the relational or interpersonal aspects of empowerment provided greater empowering capability. On the other hand, one woman attained participatory competence without demonstrating a sense of personal competence yet, in being heard, this woman was provided with an opportunity for dialogue which ultimately enhanced their understanding of their divorced status.

#### **4.6 GROUP PROCESSES THAT ARE EMPOWERING AGAINST**

## **THOSE THAT ARE NOT**

For all of the women in the study, observation suggests that empowerment was very much a learning process. Self-development was enhanced as the women tapped into their strengths and capabilities. Women gained new competencies, felt stronger and became more efficient. In essence, they had gained a sense of mastery of their situation. Clearly, the women experienced transformative changes within themselves. The women found meaning within their experiences.

The ability to find meaning in their situation enabled the women to have a positive orientation towards life. They integrated their experiences, their disappointments, shattered dreams and successes to find a sense of purpose within them and to reach out to help others. Not only did the women seek fulfillment in helping others in similar circumstances, they also channeled their energies into career, work or recreation. In investing women activities and new intimate relationships, the women found alternative sources of satisfaction to make up for what they had lost. The women were remarkable in their abilities to transcend their difficulties and to move forward. Most of the women

were able to plan for the future. All of the women derived a sense of satisfaction when they became fully aware of their personal competencies and, even more when they were heard.

Nevertheless, the process of empowerment resulted in some negative consequences. Negative consequences of participatory competence occurred even when the women felt heard. At times, family members and church elders were unwilling to share their power and they rejected the women's inputs and suggestions. On the other hand, when the family members and church ministers recognized the women's competence, they placed too much responsibility on the women to make the right decisions and to assume the total care of other vulnerable women.

#### **4.7 DISPOSITIONAL AND SITUATIONAL VARIABLES THAT HELP TO MEDIATE THE PROCESS OF EMPOWERMENT IN A GROUP SITUATION**

Factors that influenced the process of empowerment were both intrapersonal as well as interpersonal. Intrapersonal factors included the mothers' values,

beliefs, determination and experience. Social support was the interpersonal factor that influenced the process of empowerment within a group context.

#### **4.7.1 Values**

The women's' values were implicit influential factors in the process of empowerment. The values of the womanhood, of mothering, and of a sense of family were salient in this study.

#### **4.7.2 Beliefs**

The women's beliefs were influential factors in helping them to deal with their difficulties. All of the women in the study had beliefs that the future could be influenced. Their beliefs for a hopeful future were reflected in their positive, optimistic and forward thinking orientation towards life. The women also trusted their own abilities to take care of themselves and for their children as well as the family support system to provide them with love and support they need. Some of the women expressed their belief in God or in a higher power that helped them.

### **4.7.3 Determination**

The women's strong will and motivation to ensure that their children received the best care possible reflected their determination. The majority of women were remarkable in their persistence and perseverance to do everything that they possibly could to improve their lifestyle.

### **4.7.4 Experience**

The women's past experiences were potent influential factors in the process of empowerment. Experiences within their family of origin, from previous marriage, from work situations, and from educational contexts, all influenced how the women managed the challenges engendered in having a chronically ill child. Additionally, all of the women learned through their experiences of divorce. As Kieffer (1984) noted, there was no other substitute for learning through experience

### **4.7.5 Social support**

The majority of the women reported to have benefited from the support they received. This support came from many sources such as parents, church

members, friends, mental health care professionals, and other women in similar situations. This included improved self-esteem, problem solving skills and encouragement. The women profited from the support that they received from health care professionals. Specifically, information about life after divorce', emotional status, plans for self-development and future projections were important to all of the women. They felt supported when they saw that the family members and mental health care professionals were acting in their best interest.

Women who were less confident benefited from the support of the self-help group structure which acted as advocates on their behalf. Furthermore, women appreciated acknowledgement from friends for their unfailing efforts in caring so well for themselves and their children. In addition, many of the women benefited from respite care for their emotional status. They appreciated this relief which provided them with an opportunity to balance their lives.

Most of the women in the study derived support from other women in a similar situation. There was giving as well as receiving of support as the women shared their experiences with each other, encouraged one another and learned

from one another. Clearly, the women experienced a real sense of being understood and of connection through their association with other women. In understanding the process of empowerment, an important consideration is the interconnectedness of the person and the environment.

The process of empowerment takes place in a context, which includes interactions with others. Positive interactions with others are encouraging, strengthening and edifying. On the other hand, a lack of support and understanding is frustrating, disappointing and minimizing yet, paradoxically, both positive and negative support influenced the process of empowerment in this study.

#### **4.8 Résumé**

The process of data analysis and discussion has provided more insight on how the process of empowerment has been experienced by divorced women in the study. Through self-help group encounters, participants learned to be open about their feelings. The highlight of the process empowerment has been that of being interactive rather than being a linear sequence of personal development. However, the study is not without limitations. The next chapter

points out these limitations and subsequently makes recommendations for the future research. The study is then drawn to a conclusion.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter concludes the present study, on the basis of the literature reviewed and the empowering self-help group that ran for eight sessions. This includes a brief discussion of results per aim and objectives. Limitations of the study and the implications thereof are articulated. Recommendations for the future studies in this area of self-help group and the process of empowerment mark the end of the research project.

## **5.2 Summary of results as per the research aim & objectives**

### **5.2.1 The processes of empowerment in self-help group**

The conceptualization of empowerment in the context of self-help groups that emerged from this study is remarkably distinct from the conceptualization of empowerment that has been depicted in the literature. A pervasive finding in the study was how the self-help group could facilitate the process of empowerment for divorced women, which is in contrast with other studies in which a sense of community was critical to personal empowerment

### **5.2.2 Psychological process involved while self-help group members get Empowered**

The psychological processes as revealed by the study include emotional, cognitive and behavioral responses that facilitated empowerment process

through self-help group encounters. There has been a range of feelings such as feelings of victimization and discrimination that encouraged women to seek more empowerment structures. The majority of women in the self-help group demonstrated their quest to get more information in order to fight for their rights. Through empowering group structures, women assumed responsibility for their emotional, financial and physical being.

### **5.2.3 Group processes that are empowering against those that are not**

The fact that the group process was more interactive allowed the women to share their experiences and learn from each other. Self-development was enhanced as the women tapped into their strengths and capabilities. The process of critical reflections also allowed group members to assess their own experience of empowerment. Therefore, women were more empowered as they became full participants in their own personal lives. The less empowering group process according to the findings of the study emanates when one fails to integrate participatory competency and a sense of personal competence. When a group member fails to understand that her story is being heard by group members, this could lead to loss of personal power.

#### **5.2.4 Dispositional and situational variables that helps to mediate the process of empowerment of in a self-help group situation**

The observed conflicted support within the self-help group encounter, which manifested feelings of frustration, was a catalyst for constructive action. The interactions which were both positive and negative with others were foundational for critical reflection.

The women were then able to take charge and move forward. Unlike Kieffer's (1986) and Lord, Space & Farlow's (1990) findings, most of the women in this study did not have a permanent facilitator or external enabler to mentor them along their path to empowerment. In fact, only two women were more influential in the process of running the self-help group.

#### **5.3 Limitations of the study**

One of the limitations of the study was the lack of women from other racial groups. This would have great value in determining whether racial and ethnic background have an influence or not in the process of empowerment. The

sampling methods used relied on those who were easily accessible; therefore, the sample was biased. Also, the results of the study could also have been confounded by some variables like the fact that participants were like co-researchers. This could have compromised the group quality of data regarding their experience on the process of empowerment.

Lastly, the fact that there was no pre and post assessment of participants' empowerment status might have resulted on data being biased. This makes it difficult to determine whether the empowerment was the result of the self-help group encounters or may be due to some participants having already been empowered prior to joining the group.

#### **5.4 Recommendations**

Each of the afore mentioned interpersonal factors need further in-depth research to determine its influence in the process of empowerment. Given the unique findings in this study, the process of empowerment and its outcome has succeeded in generating a theory that can be used to examine other situations.

Further recommendations are as follows:

- more self-help groups that include various ages still need to be formed in the community setting in order to reach the disadvantaged group while using the community resources to empower them.
- self-help groups should not be limited to women, but also target men in order to promote sense of responsibility and commitment in the welfare of children affected by divorce of their parents;
- there should be a formal structure for divorced people supported by Government that would assist mental health professional to refer cases for psychosocial support and empowerment purposes and
- there should be a joint effort from Government and community structures to work towards reducing stigma and discrimination of those who have gone through a divorce.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

An attempt has been made in this study to understand the theoretical framework of the process of empowerment through extensive literature reviewing. The link between the self-help group and the process of

empowerment has been described from an empirical perspective as it specifically pertained to women that have become vulnerable after going through a divorce process.

The self-help group which has run through a contracted period of eight weeks was directed at facilitating a connection of divorced women with others in similar circumstances, as well as research efforts to understand the process of empowerment in women who have such support. It is hoped that this would, shed further light on the phenomenon of empowerment for divorced women.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Confidentiality Agreement**

**Name:**

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**Address:**

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**Contact no:**

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During my membership with Ubumbano Self-help group, I may learn personal and confidential information about individuals who call or are involved with this group.

Whether information is available to me through the group or accidentally, I agree to maintain confidentiality and not reveal information to any person in the group or outside the group.

I clearly understand that breaking of this agreement could result in the termination of my membership with the Ubumbano Self –Help Group.

**Signature of Member:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:**

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**Signature of Witness:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:**

## **APPENDIX. B**

### **Biographical information**

Name & Surname: .....

Age: .....

Education level: .....

Nature of occupation: .....

Number of children and their ages: .....

Medical history: .....

Sources of financial support: .....

Sources of psychological support: .....

List of group affiliation/community  
organization:.....  
.....

## **APPENDIX.C**

### **Semi-structured interview questions**

(Adopted from Atkins and Murphy reflection model, 1994)

1. Can you describe the situation where you find yourself sharing your divorce experiences with other women?
  - (a) What were your thoughts as you listen to other people's stories?
  - (b) What was the key feature of the whole self- help group encounter?
  
2. Can you identify any sort of knowledge you have acquired during the process?
  - (a) What do you think was a challenge in working through issues that are sensitive and painful?
  - (b) How did you go about the process of searching for alternatives to live normal life after divorce ?
  
3. How did the information gained during the Self-help group encounter help you solve/explain your problems?